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Stephen T. Davis: *After We Die: Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death*

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The question of what happens to us after we die is one of the most important that philosophers can address, as well as being one of the most vexed. The answer Stephen T. Davis gives over the course of *After We Die* may be summarized as follows: human beings consist of a soul and a body, and after death the soul exists for a time in a disembodied state; at the general resurrection it is reunited with a body (not necessarily made of the same matter as before, but of matter that is organized as before), which is then transformed into a glorified body that, while possessing different properties from the flesh and blood body, is nevertheless still physical. Depending on their individual merits, resurrected human beings will end up in one of two final afterlife destinations, heaven or hell, without any detour through purgatory required for those destined to heaven.

This is, of course, a straightforwardly Christian eschatology, and given that this is what Davis is minded to outline and defend in *After We Die*, and that he describes the book as “a Christian book, an exercise in Christian philosophical theology” (5), it is rather surprising to find that the second chapter is devoted to an examination of the relative merits of two different systems of salvation, Karma and Grace. Given that Karma is not really a live option for Christians, being grounded in neither scripture nor tradition, it is not clear why it needed to be considered at all. But if it had to be, then since Davis later declines to endorse the doctrine of purgatory on the grounds that it has no scriptural basis (110), it seems to me that he could have dispensed with Karma on the same grounds. Instead, he takes the more circuitous route of pitting Karma and Grace against each other, first considering a number of objections to Grace (36-38), which are later answered (42-46), and a number of objections to Karma (38-42), which are not. This leads Davis to the conclusion that “Grace should be preferred to Karma ... because, as I have argued, Karma is subject to telling objections, while Grace is not” (47), though my suspicion is that a proponent of Karma would not consider the objections raised against it here to be as telling as Davis supposes. For example, his fourth objection holds that, under Karma, it is difficult to see the connection between me and my future “karmic heir,” that is, the future version of me whose station in life will be decided by how I live in this one. While Davis accepts that my karmic heir would have the same soul as I do, he insists that this does not resolve the epistemological problem of “why I should believe that my karmic heir is me” (41) since there will be no similarities in body or, more importantly, memory. As far as I can tell, the problem here seems to emerge from supposing that individuality and memory really matter, a Western view not shared by Eastern religions which typically see individuality as illusory and memories as insignificant. Thus a proponent of Karma would probably not consider Davis’ objection to be a problem at all.

As one would expect, Davis’ analysis is more solid when focusing on specifically Christian doctrines. The chapters on resurrection, hell, purgatory, and heaven form the heart of the book, and from these chapters emerges Davis’ defense of the position outlined above. The most impressive feature of this defense is the way that Davis utilizes both scripture and philosophical argument to support his position while steering clear of dogmatism (he often notes that alternative positions are possible and indicates arguments in their favor). While

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there is much here to engage with and comment on, I shall restrict myself to a few remarks about his views on heaven and hell.

With regard to the latter, Davis modifies the traditional view to make hell not only consistent with God's loving and gracious nature but also entailed by it. Eschewing the normal characterization of hell as a place of fiery torment, Davis claims that it is "a place of separation from God" (94), populated by those who have rejected him, which means that in a very real sense the denizens of hell have chosen to be there and so are not unwilling victims of divine retribution (95). Consistent with this, Davis suggests that the suffering of the damned is largely self-inflicted (e.g. extreme remorse) or inflicted by other denizens of hell (95), rather than the result of any torment imposed by God. Lastly, Davis argues that because those in hell have chosen to be there and want to be there, God's decision to put them there—even for the rest of eternity—is simultaneously an expression of his love and justice (96), and thus the existence of hell does not detract from either. This mitigated or humane conception of hell, as we might call it, neatly undercuts the oft-made ethical objection that an eternal hell is not consistent with God's perfect goodness. As such, those not attracted to universalism may find Davis' mitigated conception of hell worthy of consideration.

As for the doctrine of heaven, after outlining what scripture has to say about it (118-119), Davis considers a number of potential problems with the doctrine, one of which is: how can those in heaven be happy knowing that others are suffering in hell? There are two parts to Davis' response. First he suggests that "Doubtless the blessed can derive some moral satisfaction from seeing that justice has been done and from seeing that God has honored the will of the reprobates themselves in their choice of hell" (120), a less morally objectionable thought than the old "abominable fancy," which holds that the blessed are said to derive *pleasure*—rather than just moral satisfaction—from seeing the damned suffer. Second, Davis suggests the blessed will experience "some sort of partial memory loss" of the reprobate in hell, perhaps brought on by being in God's presence, which "will be so overwhelming that no worries, sorrows, or pains from the past can possibly intrude" (120). The two suggestions look to me to be in tension (after all, the blessed cannot derive satisfaction from seeing that the reprobate have been justly treated if they have forgotten about the reprobate), and I am unsure how the tension could be resolved. Of the two suggestions, the second (partial memory loss) strikes me as the most promising, though I worry that it sits uneasily with Luke 16.19-26, in which Abraham (in heaven) is not only able to see a rich man (in hell) but also communicate with him, which might suggest that those in heaven do not forget about those in hell at all.

Of course, in such difficult matters one should not expect definitive or unproblematic answers, and to be fair Davis typically does not present his own answers as definitive or unproblematic, but as what he considers most reasonable given the scriptural and philosophical data available. His humility does not in any way prevent *After We Die* being a very effective and well-argued personal vision of the afterlife, and on that basis the book is easy to recommend to students of theology and philosophy of religion.